



Preventing Violence Against Girls



Challenges and opportunities for educators

By Dr. Peter Jaffe and
Ray Hughes

Educators, students and parents universally acknowledge the importance of safe schools. If students do not feel safe, there is not much chance of them learning and reaching their full potential. At the extreme, students may face significant threats to their life and to their long-term physical and psychological well being. Many students are affected on a daily basis by bullying and harassment, often inflicted because of their gender,

race, sexual orientation and/or ability. Recent studies point out that educators also suffer long-term effects from the impact of abuse and violence on themselves and their colleagues. Solutions are not simple. There is considerable debate on the underlying causes and potential cures for the problem.

It is difficult even to start a discussion on the topic of violence against girls without a great deal of resistance and backlash.

Common responses include:

- Aren't girls just as violent as boys?
- Why are you picking on boys?
- Boys are victims too but don't seek help.
- I am tired of everyone trying to be politically correct!
- Why can't we just talk about violence in general?

Violence against girls and women is a significant social issue that needs to be understood and addressed by educators. Resistance needs to be addressed directly and begins by grasping the nature and extent of the problem. Discussing vio-

lence against girls does not minimize other forms of violence nor deny the reality that boys are victimized by boys. In fact, creating a school climate where violence against girls is no longer tolerated and respectful relationships are fostered will offer protection for everyone.

National studies suggest that girls are subjected to a range of violent behaviours and attitudes. Girls are more likely to be victims of sexual and physical assault by family members than are boys. Some groups of girls are most at risk. According to the University of Western Ontario report, *In the Best Interest of Girls, Phase 2*, by H. Berman and Y. Jiwani, 75 per cent of Aboriginal women under the age of 18 have experienced sexual abuse, and half of those are under 14 years of age. One quarter of girls in dating relationships report physical and sexual abuse and young women are in the highest risk group for intimate homicides.

According to the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services' Domestic Violence Death Review Committee's 2007 Annual Report, in Ontario there have been approximately 30 domestic homicides a year from 2002 to 2006, and over 90 per cent involve men killing their intimate female partners. We need to understand the nature of gender-based violence and the extent of sexism that allows perpetrators to target girls/women. Some of the issues that must be confronted are so deeply ingrained in our society that the tendency is to ignore or minimize them.

DEFINITION AND RESEARCH ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Gender-based violence refers to any form of abuse—including verbal, psychological, physical and economic—that is based on an individual's gender and is intended to control, humiliate or harm that individual. This form of violence is generally directed by boys and men against girls and women and is based on attitude or prejudice, conscious or unconscious, individual or institutional, that subordinates an individual or a group of people based on sex and gender identity. The foundation for this behaviour includes beliefs that privilege men and

subordinate and denigrate women.

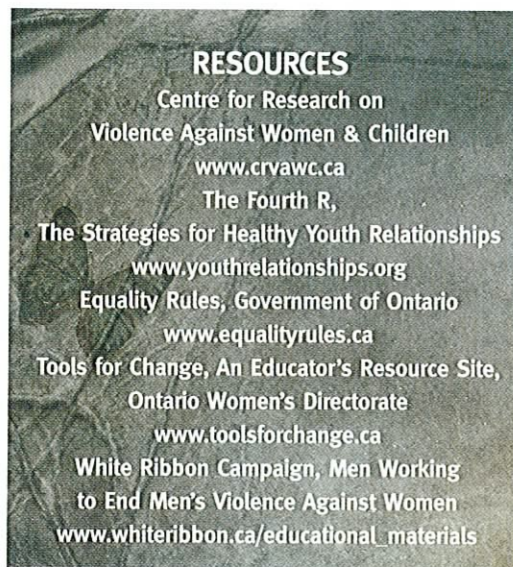
In 1995, OSSTF/FEESO, the Women's Directorate, the Violence Prevention Secretariat and the Ministry of Education, collaborated on a study entitled, *The Joke's Over—Student to Student Sexual Harassment in Secondary Schools*, which found that over 80 per cent of female students reported that they had been sexually harassed in a school setting. Researchers discovered that the majority of male students surveyed seemed to take the topic much less seriously than female students, particularly when speaking of being harassed by a female. The study was one of the first to suggest that sexual harassment was a major problem in Ontario schools and that it had to be understood as part of a continuum of school violence.

Helene Berman, Scotiabank Research Chair at the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children in London, and her colleagues in research centres across Canada found a high level of harassment reported in the daily lives of girls and inadequate responses from adults in authority to confront the issue. Adults often took a "they're just kids, they'll outgrow it" or "boys will be boys" stance in response to sexual harassment and other forms of violence in the everyday lives of girls. Researchers point out that the problems girls experience are often ignored. Girls may internalize the erroneous idea that their role as women is to support patriarchal power structures favouring the choices of boys and men.

The pervasiveness of violence against girls was underlined in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) review of schools on January 10, 2008 after the shooting death of Jordan Manners on May 23, 2007 at C.W. Jefferys Secondary School. Gender-based violence was reported at alarming rates. In one study, one in 14 girls reported that they had been sexually assaulted in the last two years (in answer to the question: "has someone forced you to have sex against your will?") and one in five reported knowing someone who had been sexual-

ly assaulted. Sadly, eight out of 10 students would not report their victimization to police or school officials.

In February 2008, our colleagues at the Centre for Prevention Science, a division of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), completed a major survey in 23 secondary schools on adolescent risk behaviours. The study, entitled *The Impact of Sexual Harassment Victimization by Peers on Subsequent Adolescent Victimization and Adjustment: A Longitudinal Study*, found that almost half of the students (43 per cent) reported experiencing sexual harassment in



RESOURCES

Centre for Research on
Violence Against Women & Children
www.crvawc.ca

The Fourth R,
The Strategies for Healthy Youth Relationships
www.youthrelationships.org

Equality Rules, Government of Ontario
www.equalityrules.ca

Tools for Change, An Educator's Resource Site,
Ontario Women's Directorate
www.toolsforchange.ca

White Ribbon Campaign, Men Working
to End Men's Violence Against Women
www.whiteribbon.ca/educational_materials

grade 9. Although the rates were similar for girls and boys, the types of harassment experiences differed. The girls were more likely than boys to be the recipient of sexual jokes, comments and unwanted touching, while boys were more likely to be subjected to homosexual slurs. Sexual harassment was associated with a range of negative outcomes for girls that included suicidal thoughts, self-harm, maladaptive dieting, early dating, substance use and poor grades. The impact of sexual harassment victimization persisted from grades 9 to 11 and was associated with higher risk for other forms of relationship violence at grade 11. Sexual harassment in grade 9 contributed to risk for both internalizing and externalizing problems two-and-a-half years later. Boys experienced many of the same issues, but at a less severe rate.

It is interesting to note that girls are harassed because they are girls and boys are most likely to be harassed because they don't conform to perceptions of ideal masculinity and are perceived to be too feminine or to be gay.

Many factors promote violence against girls in our society. Violence doesn't begin at school, but school reflects issues in the broader society. In some cases, violence begins at home with children who grow up amid abuse or exposure to domestic violence. These experiences, in turn, shape their attitudes and beliefs about healthy relationships. The media in all its various forms, from videogames to music to pornography, offer powerful images about sex roles and objectify girls as instruments of sexual pleasure. Recent research suggests that media images are not about "respect and equality but are directed at denigration and abuse.

What are educators to do? Denying the extent of the problem has, unfortunately, been the response historically. This tacitly endorses sexual harassment and perpetrates its harmful effects. One could accept the magnitude of the issue but feel overwhelmed and ignore the potential role of schools to offer hope for social change.

Instead, we offer here a host of possibilities for meaningful ways to address violence against girls in schools. Schools can begin by examining their policies and procedures, interventions, prevention and school climate as part of their overall safe school initiatives and ensure that violence against girls is being addressed.

KEY STRATEGIES AS A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

► **Develop a safe school committee** that includes community partners like the police, shelters for abuse victims and sexual assault/rape crisis centres to review and update policies and practices in regards to violence against girls. Inclusion of high school youth on such committees is essential. Review current school codes of conduct to ensure that gender-based violence is fully defined and

that there are appropriate consequences for those who commit such an offence.

► **Complete a survey** of students on the extent of harassment, including their views on why such behaviour is not reported and what they perceive as potential solutions.

The results should then be analyzed for action planning by the individual safe school committees to tailor a local response and respect the unique characteristics of each community.

► **Integrate the topic** of violence against girls into the curriculum at every opportunity.

The Strategies for Healthy Youth Relationships has launched The Fourth R: Relationship Based Violence Prevention in Ontario and many other school boards across Canada as a means of promoting healthy adolescent relationships that centre on equality and respect. Visit www.youthrelationships.org.

Relationship knowledge and skills can and should be taught in the same way as reading, writing, and arithmetic: therefore the Fourth R—for Relationships—core program.

Initially developed as a grade 9 health and physical education program targeting high-risk behaviours, The Fourth R has been expanded to include a grade 8 health unit and grade 9 to 12 English units. In all of these programs, care has been taken to ensure that the criteria outlined in the curriculum guidelines are met so that teachers can deliver the curriculum at the same time as education on social skills. Standardized training for teachers ensures them the necessary information and skills to implement the program.

The Centre for Research on Violence Against Women & Children worked with the Ontario Women's Directorate to support the Equality Rules website (www.equalityrules.ca) to help educate young people about the importance of gender equality as a foundation for a just society. The site offers advice on speaking up when they or their friends are being treated unfairly, as well as opportunities to practice healthy relationship skills through interactive scenarios. The

website also provides teacher resources including a comprehensive listing of programs matched to the Ontario curriculum (www.toolsforchange.ca). OSSTF/FEESO is working with other education partners to examine the impact of media violence on students. Sample curriculum in this area can be found at www.crvawc.ca.

► **Raise awareness** through well-publicized events that engage boys and men to address these issues without defensiveness.

We have partnered with Thames Valley District School Board (TVDSB) over the past three years for a Fathers' Day breakfast that brings student leaders and community leaders together to address the problem of violence against women. Male speakers from sports and the arts inspire young men in their future role and responsibilities in this area.

► **Create opportunities** to practise the necessary skills to intervene in situations that involve violence against girls. We have had tremendous success with a play called *Missed Opportunities* that deals with the impact of domestic violence on a mother and daughter as well as the potential role of friends, family and co-workers to intervene. In November 2009, a province-wide, youth-centred conference featuring diverse voices and perspectives will identify approaches to mentoring youth regarding violence and the promotion of healthy and equal relationships.

► **Celebrate successes** in order to sustain energy and commitment for these issues. The TVDSB offers annual awards to high school students who have played a leadership role in violence prevention efforts at their school. We hope these are displayed as proudly as the football, hockey and basketball trophies. Look for opportunities to acknowledge students for the great work that they do on youth safe school committees, on gay/straight

alliances and working toward positive healthy relationships.

► **Offer training** for future teachers as well as continuing education opportunities and professional development for existing teachers.

The University of Western Ontario's Faculty of Education offers a course entitled Safe Schools that provides opportunities to learn about all types of school violence as well as effective intervention and prevention programs. Violence against women and engaging male staff and students are critical components of the course. Teachers, administrators and all support staff must practise their intervention skills so their policies come to life rather than gather dust in binders that are tucked away in drawers. Policies without ongoing training are not effective.

We envision a host of possibilities that currently exist as exemplary practices and programs within individual schools and boards across the province—many of which have been outlined above. What is lacking is a comprehensive and integrated approach allowing every secondary school student to access to these learning opportunities. From curriculum to school climate to the daily teachable moments, gender equality and an end to violence against girls must be seen as a priority. Without recognizing the gendered nature of violence and without an awareness of the multiple ways in which violence impacts on the lives of girls and young women, we will not have schools that are truly safe. 🦋

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